

# The Conspiracy of Michael Traulos and the Assassination of Leo V: History and Fiction

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The reign of the Byzantine emperor Michael II, nicknamed Traulos (Latin Balbus, a stammerer), 25 December 820 to 2 October 829, is one of the most obscure periods in the history of Byzantium. The sources we possess are heavily loaded with entertaining stories whose veracity is, to put it mildly, suspicious, and with various pieces of propaganda. The problem with the latter is that it is extremely difficult to identify the political forces that were interested in manufacturing each particular propagandistic piece, because the usual divisions, such as Iconoclast vs. Iconophile or patriarchs vs. the Studites, apparently do not work here. On top of that, it sometimes seems that modern research has added to the amount of fiction rather than reduced it. The purpose of this paper is therefore quite modest: to evaluate the data available and to propose some solutions which, however, will necessarily remain to a fair extent hypothetical. As the first step, I will concentrate on the circumstances that led to the murder of Emperor Leo V and Michael's ascension to the throne of Byzantium.

The Continuator of Theophanes informs us that when Leo the Armenian was appointed the *strategos* of Anatolikon, he renewed his old friendship with Michael the Amorian and made him his confidant.<sup>1</sup> He acted as sponsor to Michael's son, presumably Theophilus.<sup>2</sup> After the defeat at Versinikia, when Leo was about to be proclaimed emperor, he was confused and hesitated to accept the crown, and Michael of Amorion reportedly threatened to kill him if he would not agree to become emperor.<sup>3</sup> How shall we interpret this episode? Is it evidence of discord between Michael and Leo?<sup>4</sup> To find the answers to these questions it is necessary to take a closer look at the texts.

The Continuator of Theophanes in his usual manner offers two alternative explana-

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<sup>1</sup> *Theophanes Continuatus*, ed. I. Bekker (Bonn, 1838) (hereafter ThC), 12.10–14.

<sup>2</sup> Iosephus Genesius, *Regum Libri Quattuor*, ed. A. Lesmüller-Werner and J. Thurn (Berlin, 1978) (hereafter Genesios), 9–10.1–3. ThC, 23.22–24, 1. This presumably happened in Amorion, the capital of the Anatolikon theme, in 812 or the first half of 813. George the Monk mentions Amorion as “the birthplace ( $\piατρόδα$ ) and city of the rascal and tyrant [Theophilus]”: Georgius Monachus, *Chronicon*, ed. C. de Boor, corrected by P. Wirth (Stuttgart, 1978), 797.20–21.

<sup>3</sup> Genesios, 4.39–42; ThC, 1.7, 16.15–17.5.

<sup>4</sup> As W. T. Treadgold, “*The Problem of the Marriage of the Emperor Theophilus*,” *GRBS* 16 (1975): 325–41, esp. 337.

tions of Leo's behavior, placing the one that he prefers second. The first version goes like this: "either playing a role as an actor (*εἴτε σκηνὴν οὕτως ὑποκρινόμενον*), in order to have an excuse later, or . . ." While we may disregard the second explanation—that Leo was destined by fate to rule and therefore the "mean spirit" incited Michael to threaten him, the (undoubtedly pretended) reluctance of Leo to accept the proclamation is well attested by Theophanes.<sup>5</sup> Thus it appears that Michael was entrusted with the most important role in the drama: it was he who had to make Leo's decision seem coerced. Only a person presumed extremely loyal is likely to be assigned such a duty. Moreover, Michael's next words as related both by Genesios and the Continuator contain a pledge to take care of everything in order to deliver Leo safely to the palace, so that the latter would not have to worry. We can hardly expect such a statement from a person who bore the slightest grudge against the newly proclaimed emperor. So it is no surprise that Michael's career made considerable progress during Leo's reign, since he advanced first from count of the tent (*κόμης κόρτης*), presumably of the Anatolikon theme,<sup>6</sup> to count (turmarch) of the federates<sup>7</sup> and subsequently to patrician and count (*domestikos*) of the excubitors. It is a well-established fact, however, that by the year 820 relations between Emperor Leo V and Michael, now count of the excubitors, deteriorated to the point that Michael was imprisoned and sentenced to death. Yet the circumstances of the "Conspiracy of Michael," as presented by the sources, look somewhat strange.

At some point during Leo's reign Michael was accused of high treason but managed to fend off the accusation.<sup>8</sup> This, as the Continuator specifies, happened when he was still the count of the federates.<sup>9</sup> Since Michael was by no means an eloquent man who could defend himself with the help of skilful rhetoric, the charges against him must have been particularly ill-founded, which is also confirmed by his subsequent promotion to *domestikos* of the excubitors, a very important position in the palace guard.<sup>10</sup> At the same time his relatives occupied such key posts as *papias* (supervisor of the palace)<sup>11</sup> and the count of the Opsikion theme.<sup>12</sup> Then our historians again offer us two versions, which are clearly distinguishable in Genesios but blurred in the Continuator. One is that Leo simply envied (*βασκαίνων*) Michael and therefore wanted to put him to death.<sup>13</sup> The

<sup>5</sup>Theophanes, 502.16–19. On the ritual of *recusatio* in connection with this episode, see J. Signes Codoñer, *El periodo del segundo Iconoclasmo en Theophanes Continuatus* (Amsterdam, 1995), 72.

<sup>6</sup>See J. B. Bury, *A History of the Eastern Roman Empire from the Fall of Irene to the Accession of Basil I (A.D. 802–867)*, 24 n. 4.

<sup>7</sup>ThC, 33.21. This was a very good promotion already: in *Taktikon Uspenskii* the turmarch of the federates is listed first among all turmarchs, while counts of the tent of the themes follow two categories behind, because the former rank belonged to *spatharokandidatoi* and the latter to *spatharioi*, with *dishypatōi* coming between them; see N. Oikonomidès, *Les listes de préséance byzantines du IXe et Xe siècle* (Paris, 1972), 55.7 and 59.3. See also *Cleto-rologion Philothei*, ibid., 91.19–93.11 and note 39; 149.23 and 153.4.

<sup>8</sup>Genesios, 15.46–48.

<sup>9</sup>ThC, 33.21ff. Note the word *τότε*.

<sup>10</sup>See J. B. Bury, *The Imperial Administrative System in the Ninth Century* (London, 1911), 57.

<sup>11</sup>Leo Grammaticus: *Leonis Grammatici Chronographia*, ed. I. Bekker (Bonn, 1842), 210.13.

<sup>12</sup>Genesios, 25.48. There is a possibility (but no solid proof) that it was one and the same person named Katakylas who occupied both positions sequentially. Cf. W. T. Treadgold, *The Byzantine Revival, 780–842* (Stanford, 1988), 225.

<sup>13</sup>Genesios, 15.48–49. The Continuator has a singularly ambiguous phrase: *ἄλλ' ἔμελλεν ὑπ' ὄδοντα τοῦτον ἔχων ἀεὶ καθάπερ διαπεπραγμένον ιερεῖον δεῖξαι οὐκ εἰς μακράν* (34.1–3). Who was having whom "under the tooth"?

other version is much more colorful, so it is no wonder that both historians seem to prefer it. They say that Michael kept reviling Leo and making those threats that have already been quoted. He was repeatedly admonished to stop, but to no avail. The emperor set eavesdroppers to inform him of Michael's utterances, and upon establishing that the latter did not give up his threats, ordered him to be arrested. Interestingly, at no point before Michael's imprisonment do any of the sources mention conspiracy. J. B. Bury assumed that Michael "spoke doubtless these treasonable things in the presence of select friends."<sup>14</sup> Now, either there was a conspiracy or there was not. In the first case it is impossible to understand why Michael was arrested alone and those "select friends" were not arrested along with him, although the emperor's spies were among them who would undoubtedly inform Leo of those involved. On the other hand, if Leo had sufficient reasons to believe that Michael made his dangerous remarks casually, there was no conspiracy. That would also be more natural, since Michael's activities during his reign demonstrate that he was not so incredibly stupid as to betray a conspiracy by heedless prattle. Of course, to make such speeches was not a wise thing to do anyway, but this behavior is more characteristic of a disappointed loyalist than of a sly conspirator.

We must bear in mind that of the two versions the one that mentions Michael's "unruly talk" is favorable to Leo, so the lack of direct accusations of actual plotting is highly significant. Moreover, it is by no means certain that the "second version" has to be believed at all. If in fact the first one, however unpretentious it may seem, is true, Michael's defamation of Leo and his threats to murder or overthrow him could have been simply made up in order to justify Michael's arrest and condemnation. Then this interpretation was presumably taken over by anti-Michael pamphlets (to be discussed below). At least one source, which I believe to be contemporary and which certainly has no sympathy for Michael II, explicitly says that he was among those prominent men whom Leo had arrested on false charges of high treason out of envy (*βασκαίνων*) of their bravery and talents.<sup>15</sup> Another first-class contemporary source also seems to indicate that Michael was not initially implicated in the conspiracy: "Certain officials, having made a plot, entered the palace unopposed, as if guided by an angel, and hit him inside the church with their swords. . . . Michael was a prisoner of his, fettered with two chains, and those who had subdued the beast immediately freed him and proclaimed him emperor."<sup>16</sup>

This hypothesis does present some problems, but they can be resolved in a coherent and logical way. The main difficulty is: if Michael was not a part of a large conspiracy against Leo, how could he threaten his comrades to betray them to the emperor?<sup>17</sup> Here it is worth looking at Genesios' text more attentively. The well-known story goes as follows. Leo at night visits the *papias'* quarters and discovers him sleeping on the floor while Michael sleeps in his bed. A boy servant of the *papias*, hiding under the bed, recognizes the emperor from his purple boots and tells everything to his master and Michael. Then

<sup>14</sup>Bury, *History*, 49.

<sup>15</sup>George the Monk, 788.3–10.

<sup>16</sup>Theosterictus, "Vita Nicetae Medicii," *AASS*, Aprilis, vol. 1:22–32, chap. 43, XXXIIA: Τινὲς γὰρ τῆς τάξεως νεωτερίσαντες καὶ ὡς ὑπὸ ἀγγέλου ὁδηγηθέντες εἰσήσαν ἀκωλύτως εἰς τὰ βασιλεῖα καὶ ἐπάταξαν αὐτὸν εἴσω τοῦ εὐκτηρίου μαχαίραις. . . . Ἡν δὲ τούτῳ δέσμιος ὁ Μιχαὴλ δυστὶν ἀλύσεσι κατεχόμενος, καὶ εὐθέως λύσαντες αὐτὸν οἱ τὸν θῆρα χειρωσάμενοι ἀνηγόρευσαν βασιλέα.

<sup>17</sup>Genesios, 18.42–44; ThC, 38.12–14; Leo Grammaticus, 210.10–12; Pseudo-Symeon (*Symeonis Magistri Annales*, in *Theophanes Continuatus*, ed. Bekker, 601–760), 619.4–7, etc.

they concoct “an ingenious plot” (βουλὴν δοκίμην ἐπισκευάζουσι), namely, that Michael will ask to make a confession before his execution and in this way will communicate the plan to his comrades. The confession was supposed to be passed to one of the pious men via Theoktistos, one of Michael’s most faithful servants. This narrative strikes one as an obvious piece of fiction.<sup>18</sup> Why did Michael need any device to communicate with his supporters, if the *papias* was not arrested and could perfectly well do it himself? Why did Leo let the confession be passed via Theoktistos instead of bringing the priest (or monk) to the palace in person? What is important, however, is that in Genesios the conspiracy looks very much like an improvisation, not as something prepared in advance. Especially interesting is the last phrase: ἀκριβολογησάμενος γὰρ τῷ Θεοκτίστῳ ὁ Μιχαὴλ τὰ τῆς ἐπιθέσεως, καὶ διαπορθμεύσας κρυφοιμύστως τοῖς κεκοινωνηκόσιν αὐτῷ τῆς ἐνέδρας βαθειαν διάσκεψιν, ἐπισχυρίζεται κατ’ αὐτῶν τὴν κοινωνίαν φωράσαι τῷ ἄνακτι, εἴπερ καταμελήσειαν ἄρτι τῆς ἐγχειρήσεως. There has been no mention of any ἐνέδρα so far, so it seems that this expression has to be understood as a *prolepsis*, meaning that Michael threatens those who are supposed to carry out the plan, saying that if they will not do it, he will betray to the emperor their involvement in this very plot. Michael apparently had enough loyal supporters (which by itself could be a weighty reason for Leo’s βασκανία) and could accuse them before the emperor as participants in the conspiracy even if no actual conspiracy existed before his arrest, since the very fact of receiving Theoktistos’ message already made them implicated. The option of surrendering themselves to the emperor’s mercy before Michael could betray them theoretically existed in either case, but these people obviously regarded it as unacceptable.

Symeon the Logothete’s account is plainer, but contains no contradictions and therefore inspires more trust. Michael from his imprisonment informs his σύμβουλοι, among whom is his relative the *papias*, that he will betray them if they do not endeavor to free him, and the scheme is carried out. Again, the word σύμβουλοι does not necessarily indicate a preexisting conspiracy rather than a circle of trusted friends, whom Michael could plausibly accuse of plotting together with himself. Later he demonstrated that he knew the real value of such accusations. When captured, Thomas was ready to denounce many people as his secret supporters, but Michael easily let himself be persuaded not to believe the enemy against friends.<sup>19</sup>

Michael’s official condemnation of the murder is well known from his letter to Emperor Louis the Pious: “The Emperor Leo . . . was killed by some evildoers who organized a conspiracy against him.”<sup>20</sup> The true degree of Michael’s involvement might be better clarified if we can ascertain whether this was a propaganda statement for the use of ignorant foreigners or a generally proclaimed attitude which was also offered to the Byzantines themselves. In the latter case the only chance for Michael to make his propaganda even potentially credible was to do something about at least the immediate perpetrators of the assassination. Yet no one has ever doubted the fact, related by both Symeon

<sup>18</sup>“Folktales,” as Signes Codoñer puts it (*El periodo*, 164).

<sup>19</sup>ThC, 69.16–22. The role of John Hexaboulios is probably fictitious, but the lack of reprisals against members of the aristocracy after the suppression of the revolt is fact.

<sup>20</sup>“Michaelis et Theophili Imperatorum Constantinopolitanorum epistula ad Hludowicum Imperatorem directa,” MGH, *LL*, vol. 3 (Hannover, 1906–1908), *Conc* 2, *Concilia aevi Karolini I/II*, 475–80, esp. 476.28–29: “Leo imperator . . . a quisbusdam improbis, coniuratione in eum facta, subito occisus est.”

the Logothete and the common source of Genesios and the Continuator of Theophanes, that it was Theophilos who executed Leo's murderers soon after his ascension to the throne.<sup>21</sup> Let us, however, look at a neglected testimony of an extremely valuable contemporary source published only recently, the Life of Euthymios of Sardis by the (future) patriarch Methodios, written in 831.

. . . σφάζεται ὁ θῆρ παρὰ τοῦ ἔχθροῦ καὶ ἐκδικητοῦ αὐτοῦ· οὕτω γὰρ καλεῖν τὸν τούτου διάδοχον γραφικώτατα δίκαιον, καθότι ἔχθράνας εἰς θάνατον διεκδικεῖν αὐτὸν πάλιν πειρᾶται ἐπί τε τοὺς συνανδροφόνους, καὶ τὸ δόγμα αὐτοῦ.<sup>22</sup>

. . . the beast [Leo V] was slain by his enemy and avenger, for it is right to call thus his successor in full accord with the scriptures, as he, having been hostile even to death, attempted to avenge him against his fellow murderers, as well as in regard to his doctrine.

The only possible meaning for the words διεκδικεῖν . . . ἐπί τε τοὺς συνανδροφόνους seems to be that Michael II punished the murderers of Leo. Methodios, of course, had no warm feelings toward Michael who had him jailed and flogged repeatedly, so there was no reason for him to distort the facts. Is then the story of the execution of Leo's murderers by Theophilos just another fanciful piece of literature? After all, it would not be particularly amazing, especially if we take into account the famous story of the bride-show, which looks more and more like a pure fantasy.<sup>23</sup> We might speculate that Michael II punished only the immediate perpetrators, whereas Theophilos punished those who masterminded the plot, but that is improbable, because one of the main conspirators, Theoktistos, not only did not fall from grace but remained a high-ranking official and one of the most trusted courtiers throughout the reign of Theophilos. The passage from the Life of Euthymios (specifically the preposition συν- in the word συνανδροφόνους) shows that Michael's propagandistic efforts failed to convince at least some of the Byzantines, but it is no proof that Leo's murder was planned by Michael even before his arrest rather than improvised in a desperate situation. If the actual conspiracy was organized while Michael was in jail, that indeed gave him the possibility to dissociate himself from the murder, which he obviously tried to do.

One of the most important and difficult problems concerning the murder of Leo and the ascension of Michael is the following: was it a result of Michael's personal ambitions to which a capable and energetic ruler was sacrificed,<sup>24</sup> or was it some quite serious and widespread discontent among the Byzantine elite that brought about Leo's end?<sup>25</sup> We can be sure that it is the first point of view that was promoted by one of the sources of the common source of Genesios and the Continuator of Theophanes. Now, is this a biased conception reflecting some propagandistic motifs or an objective assessment of the historical reality? Several factors inspire caution as to the second possibility.

First is the remark that the exiled patriarch Nikephoros allegedly made after learning about Leo's murder: "The Roman Empire has lost a great, although impious, protec-

<sup>21</sup> Leo Grammaticus, 214.9–215.3; Genesios, 36.82–93; ThC, 85.4–86.5.

<sup>22</sup> J. Gouillard, "La vie d'Euthyme de Sardes (†831)," *TM* 10 (1987): 1–101, esp. chap. 10.35–37, 199–201.

<sup>23</sup> See D. Afinogenov, "The Bride-Show of Theophilos: A Note on the Sources," *Eranos* 95 (1997): 10–18.

<sup>24</sup> As, e.g., Bury, *History*, 54.

<sup>25</sup> As observed by Treadgold (*Revival*, 225), "the sanguinary murder of this able emperor seems to have caused fewer regrets among the capital's troops and civil servants than might have been expected."

tor.”<sup>26</sup> Here is an authentic account of this event by Nikephoros: “And what was the outcome of the designs of the Christ-fighter, who invented these things and perpetrated them, and how his undertakings ended, will be cried out loudly by the sanctuary which he both profaned and brought down while alive, and while being justly slaughtered contaminated and defiled even more with the profusion of his criminal blood, as the rascal received the retribution that his insolence toward Christ truly deserved.”<sup>27</sup> It is not so much the contents as the emotional charge of this piece that makes it highly improbable that Nikephoros had indeed anything good to say about Leo. This means that the common source of Genesios and the Continuator, unlike the Logothete, used, among others, a source that was biased in favor of Leo and probably hostile to Michael.

Second, there is an interesting remark in the Continuator. After describing numerous vices of Michael, he says: “Yet these things, as they have been ridiculed by divine men of that time (*τοῖς κατ’ ἐκεῖνο καιροῦ κεκωμῷημένα θείοις ἀνδράσι*), should be left alone. For there are whole books exposing his character (*τὰ ἐκείνου*).”<sup>28</sup> So this historian made use of pamphlets that were composed during Michael’s reign or shortly afterward by some Orthodox(?) ecclesiastics.<sup>29</sup> Connecting this with the previous observation, we can surmise that there existed certain political forces within Byzantine society that opposed Michael and engaged in literary activities against him. Evidently, the murder of Leo was too convenient a subject to pass over in silence. Then the most natural thing for a critic of Michael to do was to describe Leo as positively as possible given his violent iconoclast policy. Since the emperor was dead, that could do no harm to the iconophile cause. Note that the description of Leo as a capable ruler who despite his impiety was much better than Michael did not make its way into any of the numerous contemporary hagiographic texts which uniformly portray Leo as a hateful tyrant and treat Michael as a lesser evil, though without any particular sympathy.

Analysis of the accusations recorded by the Continuator against Michael’s alleged heretical practices<sup>30</sup> points in the same direction. The list is long and looks like a product

<sup>26</sup>Genesios, 14.14–15; ThC, 30.13–15; trans. Treadgold, *Revival*, 225. Signes Codoñer (*El periodo*, 140) does not consider the possibility that the common source of Genesios and ThC could contain traces of propagandistic material that was iconophile yet favorable to Leo. Therefore the explanations he offers are far from satisfactory (Nikephoros said this to lend more objectivity to his criticism of Leo’s iconoclasm; or because the patriarch himself played a pivotal role in his accession; or there was simply an error in the source).

<sup>27</sup>Nikephoros, *Refutatio et Eversio*, ed. J. M. Featherstone, CCGS 33 (Turnhout, 1997), chap. 2.27–33: εἰς ὅ, τι δὲ τῷ χριστομάχῳ τὰ βεβούλευμένα, δις ταῦτα ἐπινοῶν ἔδρα, ἐπεραίνετο καὶ εἰς οἶνον τέλος τὰ ἐπικεχειρημένα ἐκβέβηκε, τὸ θυσιαστήριον μέγα κεκράξεται· ὁ καὶ ζῶν κακῶς καθαιρῶν ἐβεβήλου, καὶ ἀναιρούμενος ἐνδίκως τῷ λύθρῳ τῶν ἐναγῶν αἱμάτων πλέον ἔχρανέ τε καὶ κατεμόλυνεν, ἀξια ὄντως τὰ ἐπίχειρα τῆς εἰς Χριστὸν ὑβρεώς δεξάμενος ὁ ἀλιτήριος. The editor pertinently calls this a “lurid bit”: ibid., xxv n. 40.

<sup>28</sup>ThC, 49.15–17. Signes Codoñer (*El periodo*, 212) discards this remark as a vague reference to possibly nonexistent sources in order to add credibility to the narrative.

<sup>29</sup>Signes Codoñer (ibid., 212f) follows F. Barišić (“Les sources de Génésios et du Continuateur de Théophane pour l’histoire du règne de Michel II (820–829),” *Byzantion* 31 [1961]: 257–71) in identifying the source of ThC as Sergios the Confessor. This is certainly not the only option. Signes Codoñer does not take into account very serious arguments against Barišić’s opinion formulated by H. Köpstein, *Zur Erhebung des Thomas. Studien zum 8. und 9. Jahrhundert in Byzanz*, BBA 51 (Berlin, 1983), 61–87, esp. 64 n. 24. It is also improbable that θεῖοι ἄνδρες referred to a layman, even if he was a confessor.

<sup>30</sup>ThC, 48.15–49.7.

of pure imagination.<sup>31</sup> It has one important feature which comes forth prominently especially when compared with Methodios' criticism of Michael in the Life of Euthymios. While the future patriarch denounces the emperor's somewhat disguised iconoclasm, "the divine men" of the Continuator are completely silent on the matter of icons, although it would have been only natural to describe Michael's hostility toward sacred images as one manifestation of his Jewish sympathies. Yet the anonymous pamphletist describes even the imitation of Koprnymos in terms that have nothing to do with icons.<sup>32</sup> Thus the "divine men" either addressed a wider audience or wanted to avoid a situation in which Michael would look better in comparison to Leo V (which would have been inevitable, were too much stress put on the question of image worship), or probably both.

The hypothesis that there were people interested in denigrating Michael at any cost and that results of their activity left traces in Genesios and especially the Continuator is further confirmed by analysis of the accounts of Thomas the Slav's uprising given by both historians. As is well known, both historians relate the version, called "micrasiatique" by Paul Lemerle,<sup>33</sup> which says that Thomas, who was an affable and venerable man, revolted against Michael when he learned about the gruesome murder of his old friend Leo, and endeavored to avenge him. The themes of Asia Minor joined him out of hatred for Michael. Lemerle advanced two basic theses: (1) the "Micrasatic" version is preferable because it has no "couleur politique ou religieuse"; and (2) one should not try to combine elements from both versions, the "Micrasatic" and the "Syrian"—they are mutually exclusive, and the second one has to be rejected as a fabrication of Michael's official propaganda.<sup>34</sup> The first statement, as we have seen, is not all that convincing, and the second one seems to be simply misleading. Strangely enough, some obvious absurdities of the "Micrasatic" version did not give pause to Lemerle, for example, the remark of Genesios that Michael was hated by the entire army of Anatolikon "because of his native town, which breeds a multitude of Athingans."<sup>35</sup> This implies that the soldiers of the Anatolikon theme hated Michael because he was born in the capital of that very theme! Be that as it may, it is another remark of Methodios from the same Life of Euthymios that helps solve the problem: "And because of the rebel, who had already risen against his [Michael's] predecessor, I mean the horrible Thomas" (*Kαὶ διὰ τὸν ἥδη προεπαναστάντα ἀπὸ τοῦ πρὸ αὐτοῦ ἀντάρτην, Θωμᾶν φημι τὸν δεινότατον*).<sup>36</sup> Methodios was certainly very well informed about the events that were going on in Byzantium about eleven years before, even if he was himself in Rome at that time. He returned to Byzantium in 821, probably before Thomas reached Constantinople in December of that year, and had plenty of time to find out what had happened from the sources that were undoubtedly independent of

<sup>31</sup>Signes Codoñer (*El periodo*, 209–11) recognizes as real only the accusation of lifting taxes on Jews. However, even that is far from proven.

<sup>32</sup>Therefore Barišić ("Les sources de Génésios," 265) is not entirely accurate when he characterizes the attitude of the Continuer's source as "ultra-iconophile" because it explains different calamities with the emperor's impiety. Iconoclasm is mentioned in this passage (ThC, 73.5–13), but the emperor is not. Contrariwise, icons are not mentioned when the emperor's impiety is exposed.

<sup>33</sup>P. Lemerle, "Thomas le Slave," *TM* 1 (1965): 255–97, esp. 272.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 283–84.

<sup>35</sup>Genesios, 23.82–85.

<sup>36</sup>"La vie d'Euthyme de Sardes," 37.204–5. This text was not available to Lemerle.

the official propaganda of the iconoclast emperors. As for his attitude toward Michael II, he is perhaps the most hostile of all hagiographers who mention this emperor, and understandably so.

From the phrase quoted above we learn two important things. First, the crucial point of the “Syrian” version, namely, that Thomas rebelled against Leo, not Michael, is decisively confirmed, as it should be, since it is found in the earliest, contemporary sources.<sup>37</sup> Second, the information of the same version that Thomas fled to the Arabs under Irene and spent twenty-five years in the caliphate, turns out to be false, just as Lemerle maintained, because the word προεπαναστάντα to which the indirect object (meaning Leo V) is joined with the preposition ἀπό indicates that Thomas served under Leo and then rose against him, which Methodios expresses by combining the meanings of the verbs ἀφίστασθαι and ἐπανίστασθαι. Actually, if Thomas was the count of the federates under Leo V and if this unit had indeed been transferred back to the Anatolikon theme,<sup>38</sup> this position was very convenient to start an uprising with the Arabs’ help, as it happened. Thus, as has been pointed out by H. Köpstein,<sup>39</sup> we are dealing with two interpretations, pro-Michael and anti-Michael, which are both pieces of propaganda and mix up truth with fiction. To make this point clearer let us look at another anti-Michael text.

In the final chapter of his second book, dedicated to Michael II, Genesios says: “Michael, . . . unjustly punishing the pious Methodios, confined him to a prison on the island of the apostle Andrew. . . . Theophilos put Euthymios, who presided over the metropolis of Sardis, to a gruesome death by flogging him with bull’s sinews.”<sup>40</sup> The Continuator, apparently using his pamphlets, paints a more elaborate picture. He reports that Michael punished monks in various ways and imprisoned and exiled other faithful people, and then says: “Therefore both Methodios, who after a short while ascended the patriarchal throne, and Euthymios, who then presided over the metropolis of Sardis, as they did not yield to his wish and did not renounce the veneration of images, he expelled from the City and imprisoned the divine Methodios on the island of the apostle Andrew, which is near [Cape] Acritas, whereas the blessed Euthymios he put to death through his son Theophilos, flogging him mercilessly with bull’s sinews.”<sup>41</sup>

The other tradition on Michael, represented by George the Monk and Symeon the Logothete, does not mention these facts at all. The *Acta Davidis, Symeonis et Georgii*, while adhering to the pro-Michael version of the rebellion of Thomas, does describe in detail the imprisonment of Methodios. The author of this text, however, says explicitly that “this emperor [Michael II] did not wrong any of the saints except only the great and divine Methodios, . . . because he had secretly gone to Rome.”<sup>42</sup> This is absolutely cor-

<sup>37</sup> Such as the Chronicle of George the Monk, probably written before 847. See D. Afinogenov, “The Date of Georgius Monachus Reconsidered,” *BZ* 92 (1999): 437–47.

<sup>38</sup> J. Haldon, *Byzantine Praetorians*, Poikila Byzantina 3 (Bonn, 1984), 248–51. The very fact that the “micasiatic” version of Thomas’ rebellion ascribes the position of the count of the federates to Thomas in the reign of Leo is a powerful argument in favor of Haldon’s point of view against Turner, who doubts that the transfer did take place; cf. D. Turner, “The Origins and Accession of Leo V (813–820),” *JÖB* 40 (1990): 171–203, esp. 178.

<sup>39</sup> Köpstein, *Zur Erhebung*, 69.

<sup>40</sup> Genesios, 35.68–77.

<sup>41</sup> ThC, 48.5–15.

<sup>42</sup> “Acta SS. Davidis, Symeonis et Georgii,” *AB* 18 (1899): 209–59, esp. 237.5–8.

rect. Methodios did much harm to both Leo's and Michael's relationship with the papacy<sup>43</sup> and was therefore arrested for political, not ecclesiastical, reasons. As for Euthymios, we now know for certain from the Life by Methodios that the information of the *Acta* on his punishment by Theophilos<sup>44</sup> is also quite accurate.

Two stages of manipulation of facts are obvious from Genesios and the Continuator. The former does not actually make false statements in this case, but by adding such epithets as "unjustly" and "pious" he makes the reader think that Methodios was punished because of his faith, while the placement of the sentence on Euthymios creates an impression that Theophilos had the bishop flogged during his father's reign.<sup>45</sup> The Continuator's account, while betraying the same roots as that of Genesios, is already for the most part an anti-Michael fabrication.

Thus it can be reasonably assumed that the pro-Leo interpretations found in Genesios and the Continuator of Theophanes, but nowhere else, stem from anti-Michael propagandistic fiction.<sup>46</sup> When, however, we look at the facts that are reported alongside the fabrications, the picture looks much less favorable for Michael's predecessor. Essentially, there are two points that can be accepted as almost certain: first, the Continuator's information that "the imperial court was full of plotters and conspirators";<sup>47</sup> and, second, that it was against Leo that Thomas started his rebellion. Even without calling the ghost of historical materialism from its grave, common sense compels us to look for some deeper causes for the change of power in Byzantium in 820 than the personal ambitions of Michael the Amorian.

The results of the investigation in regard to the sources can be summarized as follows. The common source of Genesios and the Continuator of Theophanes used two traditions: one relatively pro-Michael and vehemently anti-Leo and the other vehemently anti-Michael and relatively pro-Leo. The first is well attested by ninth-century writings such as George the Monk and Theosterikos. The second can be traced back to certain anti-Michael pamphlets compiled by some orthodox ecclesiastics. The Continuator, unlike Genesios, also had direct access to those pamphlets. All the testimonies that portray Michael as an ungrateful conspirator and ruthless murderer who deprived the empire of one of its best rulers for no reason but his own thirst for power can be safely attributed to the second tradition. It should be emphasized that since both traditions were iconophile while both emperors were iconoclasts, the negative factor in them far outweighed the positive one. In other words, the representatives of the first tradition did not so much like Michael as they hated Leo, and vice versa. Therefore to obtain something close to the reality we have to extract everything favorable to Leo and unfavorable to Michael from the first tradition and do exactly the opposite with the second one, then combine

<sup>43</sup> See D. Afinogenov, *Konstantinopol'skii patriarchhat i ikonoborcheskii krizis v Vizantii, 784–847* (Moscow, 1997), 83–84.

<sup>44</sup> "Acta Davidis," 238.5–16. Bury's (*History*, 139 n. 3) cautious preference for this account was entirely justified.

<sup>45</sup> Genesios is understood in this sense, e.g., by Treadgold, "Problem," 336. Bury (*History*, 139 n. 3) is more careful.

<sup>46</sup> This will make it superfluous to postulate an iconoclast source for all the passages in ThC and Genesios that paint a positive picture of Leo, as does, e.g., Signes Codoñer.

<sup>47</sup> ThC, 41.1. F. Winkelmann notes that "starke Kräfte müssen hinter ihm [Michael II] gestanden haben" (*Quellenstudien zur herrschenden Klasse von Byzanz im 8. und 9. Jahrhundert*, BBA 54 [Berlin, 1987], 78).

the data, leaving the remaining information under deep suspicion (unless it is supported by independent sources). This simple operation, when applied to the subject of this paper, leads to the already formulated conclusions: (1) Michael Traulos was probably not implicated in a conspiracy or high treason at the moment of his arrest; and (2) Leo V was certainly assassinated because dissatisfaction of some powerful groups within the Byzantine élite had reached a critical point.

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